

Helping Your Child to Develop Pro-social Behaviour, Healthy Self Esteem and Resilience

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Introduction

Young people have always needed coping skills to deal with life's challenges, but there is ever-increasing evidence that suggests that the world of today's young people is different from that of previous generations in four significant ways.

- They are more likely nowadays to encounter a greater range of difficult circumstances, negative events and down times than previous generations;
- They are less well equipped and well situated than previous generations to cope well with those challenges and down times;
- In response to such stressors, they are more likely than in previous generations to turn to maladaptive strategies such as truancy, overusing drugs and alcohol, behaving in an anti social way, and suicide;
- There is a relative epidemic of depression amongst young people that was not apparent in previous generations. The World Health Organisation predicts that depression will be the world's leading cause of disability by 2020. Being depressed makes it even more difficult for some young people to cope with normal but negative life events. However caused, depression itself can also become one of the hardships that a young person has to deal with.

That's the bad news. The good news is that research has now been able to identify the most significant coping skills and situational contexts which help young people to become more resilient.

Pro-social Behaviour

Pro-social behaviour is behaviour which contributes to harmonious co-existence, positive relationships, social cooperation and wellbeing. It can best be described as positive behaviour towards other people and includes behaviours such as respecting the rights and feelings of others, showing compassion towards others, trying to sort out conflict rather than getting into a fight and not mistreating others. Children who develop a set of sound pro-social values have a moral compass to guide them in making decisions. A sense of identity which includes the belief that you are a person with strong pro-social values contributes significantly to healthy self esteem and the capacity for resilience. It is important that children act in accordance with their stated values. Children who claim to believe in these values whilst acting otherwise can develop an unhealthy and sometimes arrogant view of themselves which does not reflect reality. Remind your children about the importance of considering the rights and feelings of others, trying to understand others and showing kindness. Encourage them to ask themselves *'am I doing or saying anything to another child that I wouldn't like someone to say or do to me?'*

Look for signs that your child might need some more encouragement to practise pro-social values. Some of these signs might be:

- They show contempt for another child in how they speak about them
- They seem to enjoy repeating stories of another child's misfortune or embarrassment
- They quickly move in to 'excluding' another child when there is of disagreement
- They are taking part with others in bullying or mistreating another child and then justifying their behaviour by blaming the child who is being victimised (eg they might say *'it's their own fault because they....'*). Bullying can be defined as:
Deliberate and repeated nasty or aggressive words or actions towards another child which cause them distress.

There is nearly always a power imbalance in a bullying situation eg there may be two or three children deliberately trying to socially exclude one other child in a nasty way or the child who is the 'ringleader' and influences other children to take

part may have more social power at the time. Research confirms that children who do not mistreat others believe that their parents would disapprove if they did.

Resilience

Being resilient means coping with negative events in one's life and 'bouncing back' to a state of emotional wellbeing. Young people who can think and behave in a resilient manner are less likely, when older, to engage in harmful alternatives to coping, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and anti-social behaviour. Young people who have the skills to be resilient have a lower likelihood of becoming depressed or suicidal and a higher likelihood of having more satisfying lives and greater emotional wellbeing. Resilient young people tend to have resilient families, and strong connections with family, school and friends and the following skills/characteristics:-

- Optimistic thinking skills
- Helpful thinking skills
- A sense of humour
- The skills needed to achieve personal goals (eg goal setting, persistence, problem solving)
- Frustration tolerance (ie being able to tolerate not getting what you want straight away)
- Effective social skills
- A sense of competency in many areas
- Evidence-based self knowledge
- Pro-social values
- Emotional literacy skills for managing strong negative feelings and for developing empathy towards others

Healthy Self -esteem

Self-esteem is the value one places on oneself. Having healthy self-esteem is very strongly linked to being resilient. The characteristics and skills which lead students to be able to 'bounce back' after adversity and disappointment are similar to those that are typical of students with healthy self-esteem. Developing self-esteem is not just about protecting young people from negative feelings and outcomes and convincing them that anything and everything they do is praiseworthy just so they will 'feel good'. This kind of approach is meaningless and ultimately discouraging. It can lead many children to have an exaggerated view of themselves which diminishes quickly when life's inevitable disappointments occur. Healthy, well-grounded self-esteem is a side effect of a person's identifying their strengths, putting pro-social values into action, mastering challenges, working hard, persisting, overcoming obstacles, meeting life's challenges in a courageous and resourceful way, staying optimistic and achieving personal goals.

If young people are convinced that they are special and 'entitled' and should always 'feel good' then they feel resentful or like victims when they experience disappointments in life. Trying to shield young people from feelings of sadness, frustration, and anxiety when they lose, fail or make mistakes can deprive them of the motivation to persist in difficult tasks until they succeed. Feeling angry, sad or anxious can be a useful catalyst for change in academic, personal and social behaviour. It is necessary to fail, feel bad and to try again repeatedly until success occurs. It is success in the face of these difficulties that can genuinely make our children feel good about themselves.

Some Parenting Strategies

Avoid the 'happiness trap'.

Don't over-focus your parenting on helping your children feel happy all the time. Children can become quite manipulative if they perceive that parents feel bad when they are not happy. Accept that sometimes your children won't like you very much. As a parent, you are the person responsible for setting boundaries for your children. not their friend. Sometimes they will feel angry with you or push you away and this is a normal part of their development. They may not like the boundaries you set but they have to find ways to negotiate with you about them or just accept them. You are in charge and you make decisions but they can have some input. There is real danger in wanting your children to like you rather than respect you as this predisposes you to want to please them rather than be a responsible parent.

Let your child develop reasonable independence and take reasonable risks and the consequences of their actions.

Avoid being unnecessarily overprotective. If you wrap your children up in cottonwool they won't be able to grow emotionally, become independent and feel confident about dealing with

life and its challenges. Instead of restricting them or encouraging them to avoid an age-appropriate challenging situation (eg riding their bike to a nearby shop) consider teaching them how to avoid putting themselves into unnecessarily risky situations and how to handle the situation if something did threaten them or cause them a problem. Let them take the consequences of their own actions in most situations. For example if they leave their sunhat at home, don't take it up to school for them. It won't be the 'end of the world' if they have to play in a designated shaded area for one day and they are more likely to remember to take it next time. If they are allocated to a teacher with whom they don't get along particularly well, don't try to convince the school to move them into another class, Instead, try to teach them how to deal with the situation.

Help your child to accept that life can be difficult, disappointing and sad at times and that this is normal

Don't unnecessarily protect your child from experiencing some everyday frustrations or difficulties. Avoid offering 'quick fixes' or 'feel good' options when things get tough. Rather than saying 'let's go get a video', let them sit with the bad feelings, knowing that you care that they are hurting, but that it is something they have to deal with, not escape from. Don't fight their battles for them. They need to experience and cope with some difficult times so they learn how to 'bounce back'.

Help your child to build self knowledge and a sense of competence

Psychologist and author Dr. Martin Seligman believes that raising young people is vastly more than fixing what's wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities and helping them to best use those strengths. Give your child specific evidence-based positive feedback eg '*you were thoughtful when you helped your sister to fix her bike*'. Encourage your child to do likewise ie find some evidence for their conclusions about themselves. Seligman argues that success and wellbeing, to a large extent, are created by knowing what your signature strengths are (ie the top three that identify you) and then re-crafting your life to use and develop them as much as you can.

Encourage your child to develop hobbies or sporting involvements

Psychologist Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has developed the concept of 'psychological flow'. This is a positive outcome that occurs when you are immersed in an activity that offers you a challenge, requires some skill and fully absorbs your attention in a positive way. Time passes quickly, pain and worries are temporarily forgotten and there is a sense of satisfaction at the end of the process. Hobbies or sporting involvements can provide many young people with the opportunity to achieve psychological flow. When we are distressed, it can be helpful to have this 'positive space' to temporarily retreat to so that we can feel more able to cope with what is distressing us. This has been termed 'adaptive distancing'.

Encourage your child to look for opportunities to be of service to others and the community

Many studies have also found that people who volunteer to help others in need, or to contribute to the wellbeing of the community, tend to enjoy a high sense of wellbeing and achieve 'flow'. It is not entirely clear why this happens but theorists have argued that helping others:-

- gives people a sense of self worth and meaning
- fully engages them and takes their mind off some of their own concerns
- helps them to keep some of their own problems in perspective

Young people can contribute service to others in many ways such as:-

- Coaching
- Working with the elderly or those with disabilities
- Spending time with a lonely relative or friend
- Raising money for causes
- Working for the development of the community

Model and encourage optimistic thinking and positive tracking

Show your child how to 'track' the good things more than the bad things in their day-to-day life. Remind them that bad times never last and are only temporary. When they cannot predict an outcome or know what is true, encourage them to take the positive hopeful view rather than the pessimistic one.

Model, teach and reinforce pro-social values and pro-social behaviour

Stress pro-social values whenever you find an opportunity. These are values that foster positive, harmonious and compassionate relationships between people. They underpin personal and social responsibility. The most significant pro-social values are honesty, fairness, support and concern for others, cooperation, acceptance of differences, respect and friendliness. A belief in these values helps to give students some meaning to life. Acting on these pro-social values increases one's sense of being a decent, successful and worthwhile person and helps develop positive self-esteem. They act as a 'moral map' which helps young people to make good decisions.

Encourage your children to show respect to everyone and try to understand people rather than judge them. Communicate a strong message about the importance of respecting teachers

Teach and model good social skills

Help your children to learn social skills and deal well with conflict. Teach and model the skill of 'respectful disagreeing' which involves finding points of agreement before stating disagreement (eg *"The movie you want to see did get a good review but the other one is a comedy and we need a good laugh"*). This can be described as a 'good news/bad news' tactic.

Negotiate with your children whenever an opportunity arises. Negotiation requires that both people see each other's point of view and the agreed solution gives both people some of what they want.

If siblings are fighting, get them to listen to each other's feelings and point of view and then insist on negotiation in which both parties gain some of what they want. Try not to act as referee where it isn't necessary. Stress that putdowns are unacceptable. Encourage them to recognise that there are always multiple perspectives on any situation and they should try and see all of them. There are many good ways to resolve conflict. Some effective strategies include:

- Listening to the other person's viewpoint
- Accepting points they make that are valid
- Being assertive
- Negotiating
- Agreeing to disagree

Don't get too caught up in debates about 'fairness'. Use this sentence: *'Over time we try to be as fair as we can but fair doesn't always mean 'the same'.*

Encourage them to develop a strong and diversified social network

Young people who have a good network of people to spend time with and talk to can cope more readily when things are difficult for them. A social network, especially one that includes one or two close friendships, can provide them with an opportunity to spend time enjoying themselves and temporarily put worries aside, experience a sense of belonging, discuss important moral issues and get a 'reality check' on how they are seeing things. Encourage them to have a diverse social network in which they interact with and learn about many people, not just people who are similar to them.

Encourage and provide opportunities for the development of initiative

Don't do things for your child that they are capable of doing for themselves (eg phone calls, preparing breakfast). Provide lots of opportunities for them to take on tasks and challenges that they initiate and follow through themselves (eg organising or making something). Only give help when asked. Make positive comments about their success when they deal with the obstacles that are always part of taking initiative. Talk to your child about the kinds of initiative you took as a child and how it has helped you

Model and teach goal setting and goal achievement

Help your child to set realistic goals and to make plans to achieve them. Don't forget to stress the part about hard work! Celebrate with them their successful achievement of their goal and talk to them about what they did to they achieve it. Help them to develop the habit of persistence. Emphasise that success always requires not giving up when the going gets tough or boring. Frame their mistakes and failures as useful learning experiences and obstacles as problems to be solved. Talk to your child about the times when you persisted even though you were tempted to give up.

Develop an attitude of courage in your child

Talk about courage as being prepared to *face* fear, not the absence of fear. Let them know that different people are frightened of different things. Give positive feedback when your child shows courage. Encourage thoughtful risk taking but make sure they have thought through potential consequences and is prepared for possibilities. Talk to your child about your own fears and how you deal with them.

Help your child become more able to manage strong emotions

Feeling strong emotions is a normal part of life. Emotions can motivate us to find solutions and try to deal with situations. When children experience strong feelings such as anger, disappointment, rejection and sadness they are practising this process of handling their feelings and using them to try to make a situation better. If you help them to understand and manage their feelings rather than trying to 'fix' things for them, they will grow stronger.

Here are five steps to follow:

- Take notice when your child is feeling sad, worried, angry or upset
- See this as an opportunity for closeness and teaching
- Name their feeling and let them know you understand
- Help them to find a solution to the problem that is making them feel this way, but within reasonable limits
- Take an optimistic approach to the chances of their solving the problem successfully or coping with their feelings well.

Below is an example of these steps in action.

Parent: How was school today?

Child: Awful, Jodie was sick and she won't be back till Friday and I had nobody to hang around with. All the other girls ignored me.

Parent: You must have felt lonely.

Child: Yes, and I don't want to go back to school till Jodie comes back

Parent: Well I can understand why you feel that way because it isn't nice to feel all by yourself and left out. But you can't stay home from school just because you have a bit of a problem over Jodie's being away. Can you think of any ways to help yourself feel a bit less lonely tomorrow?

Child: (a bit later) Perhaps I could go to the library at lunchtime tomorrow

Parent: Seems like a good idea. Maybe you could also think about who else might be friendly enough to approach to spend some time with. Things will seem better in the morning.

Encourage Self Discipline

Comment positively on behaviour that shows self-control, willpower, and self-discipline eg attending netball practice when they don't feel like it or doing homework when there is something they really want to watch on TV.

Teach and model 'helpful thinking' whenever the opportunity arises

Teach your child to use 'helpful' thinking eg:-

- To look for supportive evidence instead of jumping to conclusions
- To avoid over-generalising from a single situation or event (eg I once fell over playing soccer so I'm not going to play soccer again)
- To get more information and/or test things out and get a 'reality check ' by talking to others.

Try not to model 'catastrophic thinking' for your child. This kind of unhelpful thinking exaggerates the potential danger or threat in a situation and assumes that the worst possible outcome will happen. It can be described as putting up your umbrella because it *might* rain. A parent inadvertently models 'catastrophising' if they are overprotective and encourage their child to be overly-cautious despite there being a very low likelihood of danger. They also model it if they assume that it would be terrible and harmful and damaging to self esteem and

wellbeing if their child had have to put up with something they didn't like (eg not being in the same class as their friends) or if they missed out on something they really wanted and felt they deserved (eg not winning an award or receiving a part in a play)

Discourage your child from becoming obsessive about a worry or something which has upset them. If they are think about it all the time it will seem to be much more upsetting than it really is. Teach them to stay busy with something worthwhile, think calmly and sensibly about it and use the strategy of 'thought stopping whereby whenever they start to think about it they turn off that 'channel' and turn on another 'channel' and think about something else.

Continually work on building a resilient family environment

A resilient family has many of the following characteristics:-

- They communicate with each other in a warm and open manner and don't keep secrets and resentments going
- They share time together and enjoy each other's company
- They have many similar values
- They show affection for each other but not necessarily in traditional ways
- They affirm, and support each other
- They accept differences and hence accept each other
- They are committed to the family and show loyalty and dedication. They view the wellbeing of the family unit as a high priority
- They respond well to changes and deal with things by talking and supporting.

Cope with family challenges by pulling together as a family.

Every family faces challenges. The major challenges in a family most often relate to:-

- Dealing with break downs in family communication
- Managing children's behaviour problems
- Concerns about how to parent appropriately in specific circumstances
- Relationship dynamics: eg sibling rivalry, temporary marital tension

Resilient parents model resilient behaviour for their children when things temporarily 'go wrong' in their family (as they usually do at some point in every family). They try to pull together, behave calmly, take a positive approach and problem solve. Resilient parenting involves:-

- Effective and calm communication with each other and with the child
- Looking after your 'couple relationship' too
- Working together and supporting each other rather than dividing, becoming angry with each other and pulling against each other
- Not using coercive or harsh punishments with children nor 'words that wound and scar'
- Staying optimistic and having a positive attitude towards the challenges and setbacks of family life

The BOUNCE BACK! Acronym (McGrath and Noble, 2003)

Use the acronym on the following page to remind yourself and your children about ways to be resilient

When things go wrong for you, or you get 'knocked down' by what happens in your life, you can decide to BOUNCE BACK! and be yourself again by remembering these basic guidelines.

Bad times don't last. Things always get better.

Other people can help if you talk to them. Get a reality check.

Unhelpful thinking makes you feel more upset.

Nobody is perfect-not you and not others.

Concentrate on the positives (no matter how small) and use laughter

Everybody experiences sadness, changes, hurt, failure, rejection, and setbacks sometimes. They're a normal part of life. Try not to personalise them.

Blame fairly –how much of what happened was because of you, because of others and because of bad luck or circumstances?

Accept the things you can't change (but try to change what you can first)

Catastrophising makes things worse. Don't believe the worst possible picture.

Keeep things in perspective. It's only part of your life.

Follow Up Reading

- McGrath, H. and Noble, T. 2005, *Eight Ways at Once: Book One: Multiple Intelligences + Bloom's Revised Taxonomy = 200 Differentiated Classroom Strategies* Sydney: Pearson Education (To find out more about the model of multiple intelligences and your child's strengths. Probably available from your child's school)
- McGrath, H.L. and Edwards, H. 2000, *Difficult Personalities: A Practical Guide to Managing the Hurtful Behaviour of Others*, Melbourne: Choice Publications (Outlines a range of behavioural patterns that can cause distress to self and others and strategies for dealing with them -mainly an adult focus)
- McGrath, H. and Francey, S. 1991, *Friendly kids, Friendly Classrooms*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire (Social skills focus- Probably available from your school's library)
- McGrath, H. and Noble, T. 2003, *BOUNCE BACK! A Classroom Resiliency Program*, Pearson Education, Sydney (Four teacher resource books for teaching the skills of resilience. Probably available from your child's school)
- Noble, T. & McGrath, H. 2005, Helping children and families 'bounce back', *Australian Family Physician*, 9, 34
(<http://www.globalfamilydoctor.com/search/GFDSearch.asp?itemNum=4709>)
- Seligman, M. et al. 1995, *The Optimistic Child*, Random House.
- Seligman, M. 2002, *Authentic Happiness*, Free Press. Also see:
www.authentichappiness.org OR
www.reflectivehappiness.com
(These sites offer a VIA questionnaire for adults to assess their character strengths)
- Gottman, J. 1997. *Why Marriages Succeed Or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last*. Bloomsbury, London
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- Fuller, A. 2000, *Raising Real People*. ACER Press
- Fuller, A. 2007, *Tricky Kids*. Finch Publications
- Hall, J. 2001. *Fear Free Children*. Sydney, Finch Publishing